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Home → B → Blackberries Nutrition Facts

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When the plant antioxidant story became public a few years ago, one of the first fruits to rise to the top of the ORAC charts was the blackberry (*Rubus ursinus*).



A member of the rose family (Rosacea) and Rubus species of brambleberries (also called "canberries"), the blackberry has become one of Oregon's most important fruit exports. Blackberries have an exotic nature to them perpetuated by the culinary fame of

the famous Marionberry, a species of blackberry first bred from two cultivars of the Evergreen blackberry in Oregon's Willamette River Valley, Marion County. Marionberries have exceptional shape, aroma and taste that make them a worldwide favorite of gourmet chefs and specialty food manufacturers, paving the way for common use of brambleberries in today's kitchens.

Drooping with drupelets of goodness

As with other Rubus species, blackberries have a unique structure that actually contributes to their nutritional value — it is an "aggregate fruit" composed of many individual drupelets, each like a small berry with one seed, surrounding a firm core called the receptacle. These individual drupelets contribute extra skin, seeds and pectin with dietary fiber value to the nutritional content of blackberries, making it among the highest fiber content plants known.

Where do blackberries grow and what characteristics do the berries have?

Blackberries grow wild and are cultivated in temperate zones from the mid-south US to near-Arctic latitudes of northern Canada and are cultivated mainly in northern US states, particularly Oregon and Washington State, and southern British Columbia. Blackberries are commercially grown on every temperate continent, including Africa and Asia.

Marionberries are the most widely cultivated blackberry specie in the world, especially favored as a popular fruit crop in many countries of Europe. Russia, Germany and Poland are major producers of blackberries. The state of Oregon harvests some 33 million pounds of blackberries each year, whereas the worldwide production is close to 1 billion pounds.

A tasty and long defensive history

The genus Rubus contains over 740 species as perennial, deciduous, woody shrubs with long vines ("brambles" up to 20 ft long) covered by firm thorns that made blackberry brambles useful as a defensive barrier along English land borders during the 16th century.

Rubus also includes roses and diverse other major fruits, including strawberries, apples, pears and peaches. While it may be difficult to see common characteristics among such diverse fruits and the blackberry, there is one important botanical similarity: the flower. All these Rubus plants typically have 5-7 white/pink petals around a central cluster of yellow stamens.

What is a "bramble" and is this the same as a "cane"?

A bramble is any plant belonging to the genus Rubus, of which the most commonly known — and enjoyed — are the red or black raspberry and blackberry, each having numerous hybrids. There are also some cross-cultivars between the red raspberry and blackberry, such as the boysenberry and loganberry.

Saying "bramble" is just a simple way to say "raspberries, blackberries, and related berry plants with thorny vines". Mainly in Oregon, these fruits are also called "caneberries" because they grow on woody bramble stems called canes.

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potassium and calcium.

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Possibly the most promising benefit from consuming blackberries is their substantial quantity of phenolic acids which are antioxidant compounds known as potent anti-carcinogenic agents, as well as having numerous other potential health benefits.

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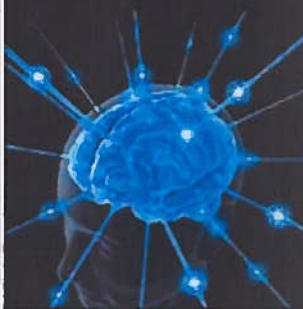
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Phenolics in blackberries include anthocyanins, ellagic acid, rutin, gallic acid, hydrocaffeic acid, p-coumaric acid and cinnamic acid, plus excellent contents of the antioxidant vitamins A and C.

Nutritious blackberries are a great addition to recipes or as a healthy fresh snack by the handful. Blackberries don't have to be fresh to be nutritious, as quick-frozen and canned berries retain most of the fresh fruit qualities.

Flash freezing, which is used to make IQF (immediately quick frozen) blackberries, helps trap nutrients and plant chemicals soon after harvest and provides for a healthier fruit. Increasingly seen in whole foods stores across the US and Canada, blackberries (especially Marionberries) can be purchased frozen in one pound bags year round.

What is the antioxidant strength of blackberries and what chemicals account for it?

Due to their rich contents of the phenolics mentioned above, blackberries have an ORAC value (oxygen radical absorbance capacity) of about 5350 per 100 grams, making them near the top of ORAC fruits. Cranberries and wild blueberries have around 9350 ORAC units, black raspberries about 12,000 and apples average 3100.

History of uses and folklore

Because blackberries have grown in Europe for thousands of years and were in use by native Americans when the US and Canadian West was opened, historical practices and folklore have survived on both sides of the Atlantic.

European blackberry juice was used to treat infections of the mouth and eyes until the 16th century. In the Pacific Northwest, the powdered bark of blackberry brambles was used for toothache relief. A tea made from blackberry leaves is said to aid digestion or arrest vomiting according to First Nations tribes in Washington State and British Columbia. Blackberry root concoctions have been used to remedy dysentery.

Blackberries contain relatively high quantities of ellagic acid, tannins and cyanidin glycosides. These are antioxidant phenolics that have a wide range of potential health benefits under current research.

What does medical research say about the health properties of blackberries?

The following anti-disease properties have been isolated in experimental models during studies specifically on blackberries. With their close relatives — red or black raspberry and boysenberry — medical research among all the *Rubus* species likely applies to one another. Accordingly, see this section in other essays on the red raspberry and black raspberry.

Although there are no clinical studies to date proving these effects below in humans, medical research shows likely benefit of regularly consuming blackberries against:

- pleurisy and lung inflammation
- anti-thrombosis (inhibition of blood clotting)
- several types of cancer

- endotoxin shock
- cardiovascular diseases
- diabetes
- age-related cognitive decline.

About The Author:

Dr. Paul Gross is a scientist and expert on cardiovascular and brain physiology. A published researcher, Gross recently completed a book on the Chinese wolfberry and has begun another on antioxidant berries. Gross is founder of Berry Health Inc, a developer of nutritional, berry-based supplements. For more information, visit <http://www.berrywiseonline.com>.

Back to the Top

Glossary

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